

Message Text

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SUBJ: TENTATIVE OPPOSITION UNITY TALKS AND MANEUVERS

SUMMARY: AS THE POPULARITY OF THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE RULING CONGRESS CONTINUE THEIR PRESUMED DECLINE AND THE UTTAR PRADESH (UP) ELECTIONS DRAW CLOSER, NON-COMMUNIST OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE PREDICTABLY BEGUN TALKS AIMED AT CREATING A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE CONGRESS. PERSONAL RIVALRIES AND, TO A LESSER EXTENT, IDEOLOGICAL DISAGREEMENTS HAVE SO FAR KEPT THESE PARTIES APART. THEY HAVE YET TO ACHIEVE EVEN A TACTICAL UNDERSTANDING IN UP. THE PRIME MINISTER, WHO BENEFITS GREATLY FROM THEIR DISARRAY, HAS STIRRED THE POT BY MEETING WITH CONGRESS-O STALWART K KAMARAJ. THUS THE PROBABILITY OF A DEMOCRATIC FRONT EMERGING AGAINST THE CONGRESS REMAINS SLIGHT AND THE STRENGTH OF THE ARGUMENT THAT THERE ARE NO ALTERNATIVES TO MRS GANDHI IN THE PRESENT POLITICAL FRAMEWORK IS REENFORCED. END SUMMARY.

1. SINCE JULY 26 NON-COMMUNIST OPPOSITION PARTY LEADERS
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HAVE MET SPORADICALLY IN ATTEMPTS TO BRING ABOUT A MERGER OR AT LEAST A UNITED FRONT TO PROVIDE A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO CONGRESS RULE. INVOLVED IN EXPLORATORY DISCUSSIONS IN NEW DELHI AND LUCKNOW WERE FOUR NATIONAL PARTIES (CONGRESS-O,

SWATANTRA, SOCIALIST PARTY, AND JANA SANGH), AND SEVERAL STATE PARTIES (BHARATIYA KRANTI DAL (BDK) AND SAMYUKTA SOCIALIST PARTY IN UTTAR PRADESH, PUNJAB'S AKALI DAL, ORISSA'S PRAGATI PARTY (ITSELF A FEDERATION), AND TAMIL NADU'S DRAVIDA MUNNETRA KAZHAGAM (DMK)). THE TALKS WERE INTIATED BY NON-PARTY ELDER STATESMAN ACHARYA J.B. KRIPALANI, WHO HAS TAKEN THE LEAD IN JOINT OPPOSITION PARTY DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST HARYANA CHIEF MINISTER BANSI LAL'S ABUSE OF CIVIL LIBERTIES. DISCUSSIONS WERE PURSUED VIGOROUSLY BY THE NEW CONGRESS-O PRESIDENT, ASHOKA MEHTA, AND BY PRAGATI PARTY CHIEF BIJU PATNAIK.

2. AT TWO MEETINGS IN NEW DELHI, THERE WAS GENERAL AGREEMENT ON THE NEED FOR A DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE TO THE CONGRESS AND FOR TAKING CONCRETE, CONCERTED STEPS TO ACHIEVE IT. OPPOSITION LEADERS DESIGNATED AUGUST 26 AS A "NATIONAL PROTEST DAY", TO BE MARKED BY JOINT PROCESSIONS AND MASS RALLIES AGAINST "MALADMINISTRATION AND MISMANAGEMENT BY THE GOVERNMENT THAT ARE AGGRAVATING THE SUFFERINGS OF THE PEOPLE." THE PROTEST DAY IS TO BE FOLLOWED BY OCCASIONAL JOINT COUNTRY-WIDE DEMONSTRATIONS AND PEACEFUL AGITATIONS AGAINST SOARING PRICES, SCARCITIES, AND THE GOVERNMENT'S ABUSE OF CIVIL LIBERTIES AND RELUCTANCE TO HOLD BY-ELECTIONS.

3. ON THE MORE LIMITED AND IMMEDIATE QUESTION OF THE UP ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, FOR WHICH THE HOME MINISTER HAS REFUSED TO FIX A DATE, PERSONAL AND POLITICAL DIFFERENCES EMERGED EARLY AND NO HEADWAY WAS MADE. ASHOKA MEHTA AND BIJU PATNAIK BROUGHT TOGETHER TWO ESTRANGED AND AGEING STALWARTS OF UP POLITICS, C.B. GUPTA OF THE CONGRESS-O AND BDK CHAIRMAN CHARAN SINGH, FOR BREAKFAST TALKS IN LUCKNOW AUGUST 7. SINGH INSISTED THAT EXISTING OPPOSITION PARTIES BE DISSOLVED AND THAT A NEW NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION PARTY, PRESUMABLY UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP, BE FORMED. GUPTA REJECTED SINGH'S FORMULATION AND INSISTED THAT PARTIES LIKE THE BDK WHICH HAD BROKEN AWAY FROM THE CONGRESS REJOIN THE CONGRESS-O. THE JANA SANGH, MORE DISCIPLINED, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
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IDEOLOGICAL, AND CADRE-BASED THAN OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES, ANNOUNCED ITSELF AVERSE TO ANY MERGER MOVE AND INTERESTED ONLY IN ELECTORAL ADJUSTMENTS. ITS LEADERS RUEFULLY RECALLED THE FAILURE OF THE "GRAND ALLIANCE" IN 1971. THE SOCIALIST PARTY VETOED A MERGER "HERE AND NOW" AND TALKED OF A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH. SWATANTRA PARTY LEADERS WERE EAGER FOR A MERGER IF A COMMON PLATFORM COULD BE EVOLVED. JANA SANGH AND SOCIALIST REPRESENTATIVES DID NOT ATTEND THE LAST MEETING OF OPPOSITION LEADERS ON AUGUST 14, AND LITTLE HAS BEEN HEARD OF OPPOSITION UNITY OR ALLIANCE SINCE. SOCIALIST MP MADHU LIMAYE TOLD NEWSMEN THE TALKS HAD "FAILED"; CHARAN SINGH DROPPED OUT.

4. THE PRIME MINISTER MOVED SMOOTHLY TO DISCONCERT OPPOSITION LEADERS. SHE BEGAN WITH BIRTHDAY GREETINGS TO CONGRESS-O VETERAN K. KAMARAJ, WHO HAS KEPT HIS CONGRESS FAR AHEAD OF HER CONGRESS IN TAMIL NADU. THEN A CONGRESS GENERAL SECRETARY, TAMIL NADU'S M. CHANDRASEKHAR, CALLED ON KAMARAJ. PRELIMINARIES OVER, HE GAVE HIS FRIENDS THE SLIP IN NEW DELHI AUGUST 11 AND CALLED ON THE PRIME MINISTER FOR LENGTHY EVENING CONVERSATIONS AT HER BUNGALOW. IT WAS THEIR FIRST MEETING SINCE 1969. NOTHING HAS YET BEEN

REVEALED, BUT THE POSSIBILITY OF A GANDHI-KAMARAJ RECONCILIATION SHOOK OTHER CONGRESS-O LEADERS.

5. COMMENT: JUDGING BY THE LITTLE THEY HAVE ACCOMPLISHED TO DATE, THE PRIME MINISTER HAS LITTLE TO FEAR FROM THE AGEING AND TENDENTIOUS LEADERS OF THE NON-COMMUNIST OPPOSITION. THEIR PERSONAL PRIDE AND THE RIVALRIES WHICH DIVIDE THEM HAVE BEEN MADE PAINFULLY APPARENT TO THE PUBLIC. THE FEEBLE CALL FOR A "NATIONAL PROTEST DAY" IS TOO LITTLE AND TOO LATE; BOMBAY'S SHIV SENA AND THE PRO-MOSCOW COMMUNISTS MADE A GREATER IMPACT WITH THEIR WELL-PUBLICIZED AND WELL-TIMED "DE-HOARDING" CAMPAIGNS. LOOKING AHEAD, IT IS DIFFICULT TO FORESEE ANY ARRANGEMENT UNDER WHICH THE VARIOUS OPPOSITION LEADES WOULD GIVE UP THEIR CLAIMS TO PRIMACY IN A UNITED ATTEMPT TO DEFEAT THE CONGRESS AT THE POLLS. THE MOST THEY WILL PROBABLY ACHIEVE IN UP AND ELSEWHERE IS A SERIES OF TACTICAL UNDERSTANDINGS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR CANDIDATES AT THE EXPENSE OF CONGRESS NOMINEES.

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6. THE KAMARAJ PLOY IS TANTALIZING. OBSERVERS NOTE HE WAS ALWAYS ON THE LEFT AND SEEMED ODD MAN OUT IN THE COMPANY OF CONGRESS-O RIGHTISTS LIKE MORARJI DESAI AND S.K. PATIL. A MERGER OF THE TAMIL NADU CONGRESS-O WITH THE RULING CONGRESS, WHICH MADRAS CONGRESS-O LEADERS ARE SAID TO FAVOR, WOULD GIVE THE PRIME MINISTER AT LEAST SOME BASE WHERE NOW SHE HAS NONE. AS WITH THE OPPOSITION LEADERS, THE HITCH IS PERSONAL: KAMARAJ WAS ONCE VERY BITTER AGAINST MRS GANDHI. HE MAY HAVE MELLOWED FOLLOWING HIS TALKS WITH THE PRIME MINISTER. ANOTHER OBSTACLE WOULD BE KAMARAJ'S PLACE IN THE NEW CONSTELLATION.

MOYNIHAN

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